

# **AN INTERVIEW WITH CECIA ALVARADO**

An Oral History Conducted by Barbara Tabach

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Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada  
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV  
University Libraries  
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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Produced by: The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries

Director: Claytee D. White

Project Manager: Barbara Tabach

Transcribers: Kristin Hicks, Maribel Estrada Calderón, Nathalie Martinez, Rodrigo Vazquez,  
Elsa Lopez

Editors and Project Assistants: Laurents Bañuelos-Benitez, Maribel Estrada Calderón,  
Monserrath Hernández, Elsa Lopez, Nathalie Martinez, Marcela Rodriguez-Campo, Rodrigo  
Vazquez

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The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews with permission of the narrator.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada*.

Claytee D. White  
Director, Oral History Research Center  
University Libraries  
University of Nevada Las Vegas

## PREFACE

Cecia emigrated from Costa Rica when she was sixteen years old. She lovingly describes her homeland. She also recalls very early childhood memories of the family living in Panama where her father was a minister. It was during the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama to depose Manuel Noriega.

By the time she was sixteen years old, she self-describes as a bit rebellious. Her independent streak brought her to Las Vegas, where a brother resided. She enrolled in Desert Pines High School, where life as a Spanish-speaking immigrant was fraught with challenges. She didn't seem to speak the same Spanish as others around her. Managing the educational system was not easy, and her transition made more difficult by bullying. Nevertheless she persevered. She found work, graduated, and eventually attended College of Southern Nevada.

At the time of this oral history interview, Cecia Alvarado is the Nevada Director of Mi Familia Vota. As explained on their webpage, the organization's mission is to "build Latino political power by expanding the electorate, strengthening local infrastructures, and through year-round voter engagement." Cecia shares insights and inspirations from her time as the director during a very political divisive era, complicated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

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September 15, 2020  
in Las Vegas, Nevada  
Conducted by Barbara Tabach

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Cecia Alvarado 9/15/2020  
Signature of Narrator Date

Barbara Tabach 9/15/2020  
Signature of Interviewer Date

**This is Barbara Tabach. Today is September 15, 2020. We are sitting in my office, and I am sitting with Cecia.**

**Cecia, I'm going to ask you to pronounce and spell your name for us.**

Cecia Alvarado; C-E-C-I-A, A-L-V-A-R-A-D-O.

**We'll start out with where you were born and what was it like to be there?**

I was born and raised in Costa Rica. I was actually born very close to the border with Panama.

When I was about four years old, my family actually moved to Panama City, and we lived there for about three years, maybe. The only year that I remember vividly, it's 1989 when the U.S. had the conflict with Panama and I was living there at that time.

**And you would have been about how old then?**

Eighty-nine [1989]—so I was five.

**And you have memories of that.**

I have memories because—more than memories, I remember sounds.

**What do you remember?**

Bombs. The curfew. There was a siren at six p.m. every night, was the curfew. I also remember going to school, showing up to school, and there was not a school anymore; it was bombed. I remember finding a doll in the debris of the school. A few memories, but mainly those memories and those sounds affiliated to memories.

**Did you keep the doll?**

No. Things got really bad in Panama, and the government of Costa Rica sent a plane to retrieve us and any Costa Rican nationals that were living in Panama to go back. I don't quite remember, and I never really had this conversation with my parents about that time, but I believe that the

government of Panama might have ordered for any foreigners living in that area, especially because we were so close, to leave the country.

**That was a long time ago.**

It was a long time ago and I was little and I'm surprised that I have those memories. I still remember the national anthem of Panama. I was very little. I remember when we went back to Costa Rica, I started going to kindergarten in Costa Rica, or pre-K, so I was probably pre-K. I know my siblings—at that time I was the third of four—I know my siblings were in school in Panama at that time.

**What took your family to Panama?**

My dad's work.

**And he did what kind of work?**

He was a minister. He was a preacher, and so he was transferred to Panama at that time.

**Did the family, then, just resettle immediately back into Costa Rica? You had other family in Costa Rica?**

Our church helped us and they resettled us and they arranged for us to have a place to live. We had our home back in Costa Rica, but we resettled in a different part of Costa Rica.

We actually went north on the border with Nicaragua. Actually in '92, we lived in Nicaragua, too.

**What do you remember about that?**

I have really good memories of Nicaragua, beautiful people. I remember the lake. We lived in Granada and I remember going to the big lake in Nicaragua. The schools were really strict; they would hit you; they're allowed to hit you. But I was always a good student, so I never got hit.



The teacher would use this big wooden rule, and you had to put your hands in front if you misbehave, and they will hit you. It never happened to me.

**I'm glad to hear that. That could be scarring, too.**

That could be, yes. But it kept us grounded there at that time, made sure I didn't misbehave because I didn't want to get hit.

**Can you tell me a little bit about your religion and what your father was a minister was and what that was like in your world? What do you remember about your childhood?**

I had a beautiful childhood. I was very happy. I grew up in a religious home. My siblings, it's seven of us and we are very close. We grew up very close, very close to our parents, too. I had a beautiful, very happy childhood. Christian religion. The people from the church and the members of the church, I grew up seeing them as family. Up to this day when I go back to Costa Rica and visit, I still see them as family, a lot of them, and the people that I grew up around, I still see them as family.

**So many people have this stereotype that Latinx people are Catholic, but there is a variety of ways and religions to celebrate, I assume.**

Yes. My entire family, very diverse family, some of them were Catholic, but majority of them practice—they're Christians or, not like here with the different religions, but I know that there are different denominations in my family, but Christianity is mainly the faith practice among my family, very few Catholics. But Costa Rica, it's a very Catholic country. The church continues to be sort of part of the government and they celebrate the church holidays as national holidays. Even in school up until this day they still teach—there's a religious class. We were excluded. When I was in school, we were excluded from the class, given different assignments, but sometimes the class focused on just teaching good values and how to be a good person, so we

were part of that. The only part that we were excluded from was from the praying and reading the Bible, but my parents thought that anything that makes you a better person then be part of it. **That's good. Costa Rica, I hear, is just a beautiful country...Two of the students who have worked on this [Latinx] project spent time in Costa Rica. It makes me want to go. Have you gone back?**

I go back—I haven't been back in two years, but I do go back quite often. I try to go back every year, especially after I became a mother, just to have my daughter be close. My whole family is there. Most of my family is there now. Just in the recent years two of my siblings moved here to the U.S., but I still have two siblings over there, my mother, my dad, they're back in Costa Rica, and my family and my childhood friends. It is a beautiful country. It hasn't changed a lot. It hasn't changed a whole lot since I was there twenty years ago. They've improved some of the roads and the schools, but it pretty much continues to be a very small country. I enjoyed the Costa Rican culture and just the people.

Now that I'm part of a bigger, diverse Latinx culture, just understanding now the difference—when you're new to the U.S., even though you're a Latino, you still feel isolated from other cultures because we're not all the same. The way we speak our Spanish and the lingo is so different, the food, and so that was definitely a culture shock.

But Costa Rica in my childhood, I look back and I had the best childhood. I grew up with good access, good access to good education in Costa Rica. I had my childhood outdoors. I tell my daughters stories, things like kids don't get to do here in the U.S. We spent most of our day playing outside. We lived close to a creek, so we would go play in the rivers and go with our friends. I remember my childhood best friend, her parents had a big farm. I used to go help her milk the cows in the morning and just spend my entire day, when we were not in school, there.

One of my favorite things, too, I used to, and I still do, is to climb trees. We had this mango tree that we would climb every single day and just sit there for hours, talking and picking mangos. It was just so beautiful, I don't have a bad memory of my childhood. What you think is bad and you look back now, it wasn't bad. The one thing that I wasn't a big fan of Costa Rica is the weather. I'm not a big fan of the rain every day. Every single day it would rain. Sometimes we couldn't go to school because it wouldn't stop raining. Things like that. But overall it's just a beautiful, happy childhood.

**And your daughter being raised here, was she born in the U.S.?**

Yes, she was, yes.

**Does she know what she's missing?**

She does. But I know what she's missing, and sometimes it breaks my heart. She's fifteen now, so she is more heading into becoming an adult. One particular example that really broke my heart: A couple of years ago we were visiting Costa Rica. In our summer during school over there, they have their break actually during winter break. They spend more time in school over there than we do here. My mom lives very close to a middle school, and we were driving by and she asked me, why were the kids playing outside in the school? I realized that schools here no longer do recess and actually recess is a privilege. If you don't do your homework, something happens, then you don't get recess. It broke my heart that we're raising our children here confined in spaces or in school spaces, between four walls all day, and then they go home and we keep them inside. There's really not an outdoor life for them. I think that's why our kids suffer so much from more anxiety. Yes, she was surprised that kids there got recess. We used to get forty-minute recess.

**Then today, we're living in the COVID-19 era, pandemic. Did you find that you had to isolate her even more from outdoors and all of those activities?**

Yes. She's completely isolated from any social activities and social life. As a teenager that's really sad. When I was her age, I was still in Costa Rica. I came here when I was sixteen years old. When I was her age, I was still playing with dolls and spending time outside, and now we're going through this pandemic and it's even more difficult for them. They are already always confined to four walls and now they're missing out on even socializing with their peers because now we're quarantined.

**It must be challenging to be a working mom. Are you a single mom, too?**

I am a single mom.

**So you're a single, working mom. Are you able to work at home?**

Yes.

**That's good. You're at least with her and helping her.**

Yes. I feel very privileged because I get to work from home. This pandemic has emotionally affected us, not physically yet. It hasn't hit us financially. We're still able to have a job and continue with business as usual, just from home.

Then my daughter is missing out on trips. It was her birthday last week, missing out on having a celebration with her friends. She usually spends her summers in Costa Rica. Since she was seven she would always go back, well, one, because I am a single mother and didn't really have a support system. My sister moved here just recently, maybe about three years ago. Up until then I didn't really have a support system. At that time I was working a different job, so I didn't have the flexibility to take care of her. I tried summer camp one day—actually for a week during her first summer. I think she was seven. Then she came home sunburned. That's how hot it is

here that this weather—when they're not in school, they can't be with their parents, and the weather is not equipped for them to enjoy outdoors. It was a hard decision, but I had no other choice but to send her to Costa Rica. I literally sent her because at that time she was so little I drove her to L.A. where they do offer non-stop flights to Costa Rica, and I put her on a plane and sent her to my mom. She spent the first summer in Costa Rica. It was hard because the only time—and up until last year she spent her summers in Costa Rica—the only time she is not at school, I can't be with her. We never really had that time. I'm divorced. She was little when I got to spend all the time; I was with her at home until she was six years old. After that anytime that she is not in school, I'm at work, so I can't take care of her.

But she would go spend her summers in Costa Rica. My family was there and my best friend. It helped her. She learned Spanish. She is fluent in Spanish. She made friends and she got to have a little bit of the childhood. But it is still culture shock for a child that's grown up in the U.S. even if they have Latinx roots that they go back to another country and they have to adapt to another culture.

**She's the outsider now, right?**

Yes. Yes, she is the outsider. She does have the American accent when she speaks Spanish.

**Culturally, what distinguishes Costa Rican culture?**

I think there's a lot to do with mentality. Costa Rica abolished the army in, I think, 1945. It's a country that decided to invest their money in education rather than in having an army. We also are raised with this pride for freedom, a little bit different understanding freedom here means because you won a war, because you fought a battle whether it was a civil war. Over there freedom is just the pride of not having an army. You are raised with really a different form to see what being a patriot and the love for your country. Love for your country also means that you

take care of your country; that you're good to your neighbor; that connection that we have among each other. For instance, if you're in Costa Rica and you go to the store, you have to say hi to everybody; it's very rude if you don't. If you go to the store, you say, "Good morning," to everyone. Even if you're driving in the street, people wave at you. I have taken friends with me and they say, "Why do people wave at you?" It's just part of it. In Costa Rica we use the phrase *pura vida* a lot, which is pure life. It's a way of living. It's a lifestyle of being very laidback, relaxed. That mentality of...I'm not trying to say that any country tries to teach you how to be a bad person, but understanding what freedom really means, understanding value on education. We really value education. And also understanding taking care of each other, but also taking care of the environment. Since we are in school, you are taught to recycle, to take care of the environment, to plant trees to celebrate, to clean up after yourself. I remember since I was little and also something my parents always instilled in us was to do community work. We were never allowed just to hang around. On some weekends we have to volunteer to go clean up the schools. The schools are maintained by the community.

The lunch lady is a mother. It's food they're making there for you, so you're eating food that you would eat at home. They feed you breakfast, they feed you lunch. Even part of the school is that you have to bring your toothbrush and go brush your teeth after you have lunch. Including those habits into education and really shaping you, not only preparing you in education, it's more broad, I want to say, maybe, over there because it's not just about the books, but it's also a lifestyle. It's education on who you are and the person. Now that I'm not only adult, but I have the opportunity to live in Panama where I did experience completely the opposite of the way you are raised in Costa Rica, to appreciate the freedom, but understanding how we take pride to that culture. A lot of feedback I get from people, what they enjoy from

Costa Rica, it's actually the people in Costa Rica. That's something that has always stood up with me.

**That's great. Well explained. It must have been hard this summer for your daughter, then, not to be able to go back because of the pandemic, restrictions of travel?**

Yes. We were planning on taking a trip to Japan, and, obviously, none of that was possible. It was really hard. My siblings are grown now. Ten years ago my younger brother was thirteen and my other sister was still living at home. My brother is almost mid-twenties now and he's in school, so the house is more lonely. She doesn't like to spend a whole lot of time. My best friend does take her for a few days when she is in Costa Rica. She likes going back, but only for a few days. She doesn't want to spend an entire summer over there anymore.

**Tell me about how you came to the United States; how you got to Las Vegas. That must have been an interesting journey, and you were young, it sounds like, when you did this.**

**Can you tell me about that?**

I actually never wanted to come to the U.S.

**Oh really?**

No, I never did. My other sister, she wanted to come here.

**Older sister?**

My older sister. My older brother was already living here, the eldest. He had already been in the U.S. for about six years. He got married.

I was always good in school. I was always a good student. I also had a fascination to learning English in Costa Rica. Now they do teach English since you're in middle school, but back then it was when you are in high school, which you start high school in seventh grade. I was always a good student, but I was growing up and being a teenager. I would say that even

though I speak wonders of our culture, I also always have this almost that my mentality didn't fit in Costa Rica with everything. I would say my dad was somehow in the middle of having that typical macho mentality, but also, at the same time—it was more in the middle. I would say now it was more in the middle because he would encourage us to study, to be independent, to take care of ourselves, so maybe the other part was also being a father and overprotecting a little bit. There were just a lot of things that I started feeling that it was just, I don't know, different. At the time I was sixteen years old, so in the midst of your changes and new stage of your life. I would say that I started being a little more rebellious towards my parents and wanted to just do completely the opposite. If my dad didn't want me to do something, then I would do it.

My brother was already here and told my dad to just send me here with him and allow me to finish school here, and that way if it was just a phase I was going through, I would just get over it and it wouldn't really affect the relationship with my parents. My parents already had a visa. If you're a minor, then it's easier. You just have to go to another interview. I was really hoping that they would deny my visa, but I got a visa. My sister got it. I was really hoping, so it was really hard because I didn't want to leave. I was really happy in Costa Rica. But I also know that there was a lot going on in my head, things that I guess I was just trying to figure out my own identity. Then my parents, even though I was the third one, my sister was always...whatever my dad said to do, my sister always obeyed. My brother had already moved out. It was the first time my parents were facing a rebellious teenager, so they sent me here to finish high school.

I came here when I was sixteen. In reality, at sixteen you're either a junior or senior in high school. Well, when I got here they sent me back to ninth grade, as a sixteen-year-old. This was twenty years ago. There was not really a robust ELL program. At that time it was called ESL. In the ESL program, I was enrolled in Desert Pines High School. It wasn't really a



program. They did have English classes, so the ELL classes at that time, but it wasn't really designed. I see the schools now and I see the programs now; they're really designed to help you learn English. I feel that back then they were teaching you how to understand; that's it. I don't remember ever doing a writing assignment. I don't remember ever going to different testings to test your level of advance or if you're making any progress. There was never any measurement for progress, so you have to really figure out—about four periods of English classes where they used books that are made on the military bases because all the language that I learned the first few months was military language. I remember it was, yes, all military terminology, all the examples and everything. Even the pictures were military. That was all the books I remember learning English from.

I enrolled in after-school classes on different programs that were offered in the community, and I learned more through there. There was never a program to teach me how to write. Even through college I have struggled so much because I never had a proper structure on learning how to write English. That part was quite difficult.

What was also difficult was the fact that I was used to a different quality of education, and I was used to a challenging setting in education, and I wasn't being challenged. Even though the challenge was to learn English, we weren't really challenged to measure our progress to say you've already advance one level. It was really measured just by period. If you completed the first semester, then you just go to English two and English three and so on and so forth, but there was never any testing to measure if you were really ready for the next level or if you needed help. There was no testing done at all.

**You experienced that in Costa Rica in the education system there; that they tested you like you're describing?**

No. But I am more so referring to the English programs. The English programs here; that they never measured any progress to see if the student is really learning any English. It was really like, sit in this classroom, here are the books, you will do a few exercises, but that's about it. There wasn't really a program that was dedicated to teaching you. It was more you have to learn how to understand English.

The challenging part was not only that I thought I wasn't learning anything at all, I was not receiving an education, I was not really learning English. When you are young it's easy to adapt to a second language, but at a certain age, too, you have to learn pronunciations and you have to learn the mechanics of a second language. The challenging part was that you're put in a room with newly arrived students, as I was one, and my classmates, most of them, they didn't have an interest of learning, and that was the hard part, because I've always wanted to have an education. I always wanted to graduate and I had plans of going to college. That was the first part was knowing that no one there cared. They would constantly interrupt the class with jokes. If you were a student and you wanted to, maybe, pay attention, then they would make fun of you. I had a lot of problems, too, because I never fit into the stereotype of being an immigrant, so I faced a lot of rejection from my classmates who were the only Spanish speakers in the school. That was really hard. I had a lot of problems with them. Other girls picked on me.

**You were bullied by your peer group.**

Yes. They would make fun of how I spoke Spanish because it was a different Spanish. Again, I felt like in Costa Rica I had access to good education, so I always felt like—not that I was better than anybody, by any means, but that I have had that privilege of having access to a better education, maybe, for any circumstances. I came from a middle class family. We were a big family, but big happy family. We also had something to eat. I never, in reality, faced any hunger

or struggles. It was a setting that...I never felt like I could fit in, for lack of a better word. That was the challenging part.

The only way out was to talk to my counselors about switching me to regular classes, which used to be called regular classes and it was just regular English classes, just have the classes that anyone who is a native speaker will have those classes. I had a few problems. I got into fights, which I never had before. I got into fights. I was constantly jumped at school. The counselor agreed to switch me to those classes. I managed to finish school, but when I step back, even though I didn't have access to all the classes, the classes that I had I was doing good enough that I joined the National Honor Society. Those are not things that are common with the newly arrived.

**For example, if you were taking an English class, where you're reading a book in English, not to teach you English but just to read it or write ---how would you navigate that?**

What helped me the most was the English that I took in Costa Rica, which was extremely basic. I took about a year. But my professors in Costa Rica would only speak English to us, and they would test us on pronunciation and writing, a little bit different than what was done here. Even if your spelling was wrong because you were learning English, they would give you a pass rather than say, no, it's this way. At that time they used to do the proficiency test, and I passed my reading test the first time in my first year here, and I passed the writing test on the second time. I managed.

My brother was also married to someone that was native or American. He was married to a white woman, so we only spoke English at home. I learned how to understand English very fast. I felt like I was able to understand English and that helped me to be transferred to another class, regular classes, but they require a lot of writing. CCSD's education has never been—now

they do more testing and we can see that children are still behind, and I can attest to that. I know that there are charter schools now and different programs. We're talking about twenty years ago. Especially for an immigrant student, there wasn't really a whole lot of options.

I also didn't have my parents here, so I had to learn how to navigate the school system on my own. Also, we didn't have anyone to believe in you even though I was a National Honor Society student. I joined the Latino clubs; I joined SOL, the Student Organization of Latinos, first a member. It kept me busy on the weekends. I didn't have family, so it was a great way to get to know more people, too, and I think that is what has led me to today of being in the community as a lot of people know me from when I was younger. Also, it helped me just to keep myself busy. It would make me feel a little bit close to home because my parents would always push us to volunteer and to clean up the schools and just do community work. It also allowed me to get to know other people other than the classmates that I had, so I started making other friends.

But even though you can say that I was showing signs of being someone that could possibly have opportunities, my counselor never talked to me about college. They never talked to me about other classes. I don't know if the school, per se, had honor classes like they do now because I never had that conversation with anybody, and at that time I was not fluent in English to understand if they were other classes. I don't know if there were any because I don't remember.

**I got you. You were like an emancipated child and you were trying to go through this in a world that wasn't—yes, we didn't do a good job. We still don't, to encourage. What happened that you were able to keep excelling?**

**Now, your brother, let's talk about him a little bit. What kind of work was he doing at that time?**

He's always been a truck driver, so he was away quite a lot.

**Did he become an American citizen? Okay, so he didn't have any immigration issues or anything like that.**

No. When I moved here he was already in the process of becoming a citizen.

**Did he enjoy having you around, or was that a challenge?**

I don't think that he...the way I felt was that he thought, I brought you here, but I'm not your dad, so you have to take care of yourself, to the point where very shortly after I arrived, he moved out of state.

**Oh, wow.**

Yes. He moved out of state. His wife was a nurse. She was studying nursing here. But she was originally from Pennsylvania, and she always wanted to go back home. I guess her entire family was there. She had inherited a home, so they wanted to go back, but she didn't want us to go. She didn't want us living—my sister was here, too, with me. She didn't want us living there. My brother talked to us pretty much, I want to say—I can't remember the exact time frames, but I know he talked to us about making sure that I will get a job, and my sister was already working, so make sure that I would get a job because he was going to leave and he had a place for us to go live, so we did. I met the person where we went to live that they didn't move into the house.

**If I go places you don't want me to go—**

Yes, that's fine.

**—stop me anywhere. Who did you go live with? Was it a good situation? How would you describe it?**

Half and half. We went to live—it was a lady where he had rented a room at her house for a long time, and I guess they had a good relationship. She offered to rent us a room, so we would rent

the room at her house. We met her the day we moved in, so a little strange. Again, in Costa Rica you don't rent rooms in people's homes and you don't live with strangers. You live with your family especially if you're a teenager. I got a job at McDonald's. I worked at McDonald's in the afternoons. It was very challenging because, remember, they put me back in ninth grade, and in order for me to get caught up, I was doing two years in one year. I was going to high school and then I was also going to night school. I was at Desert Pines, which I believe is \_\_\_\_\_ High School now. That used to be...I don't even remember the name of the school. I think it was called...I don't even remember at that time. But they had a program basically for any troubled students, and the program was after school, so it fit with what I needed at that time, was to get caught up with credits. They didn't accept the transfers from Costa Rica. Again, twenty years ago it was not the same technology as now to also understand, probably, a transcript, not the language barrier, but understanding what classes I was taking and what it would equal to here. I believe they don't do that anymore. I had to get caught up with two years at once. The first year I did ninth and tenth grade, and then the second year I did junior and senior at the same time. It was a little bit challenging because I went from having the best childhood and enjoying all this free time to becoming an adult overnight, having to be in school and work. There wasn't really time for me to say, I'm going to enjoy this. On the weekends I was a member of the club, so we would sometimes have club activities and community service. Yes, that was the first year.

Working at McDonald's we had a frequent customer at McDonald's on a—one of those places where you send money to other countries, and he offered me a job there and he paid me more. I don't remember how much, whatever the minimum wage was at that time, at McDonald's. I went from that to making nine dollars an hour. As a high school student that wasn't so bad. It was better because it was more a receptionist, per se, or a cashier job because

you wire money to other countries and you cash checks, too. It allowed me to be sitting down and I would get caught up with homework there. I worked there for about a year, and worked there on the weekends, too, on Saturday. Yes, I did that for about a year.

**That's great. What happened next? How did you get into college? What were the steps to that?**

I honestly didn't. I remember in my senior year I got caught up with all my credits, so I only had four or five classes. I never even did senior day pictures. When you don't speak English, no one makes you aware of that. I also probably couldn't afford it at that time. Anything that you have to pay for, I just couldn't afford it. But also I remember in my senior year getting letters from universities and I didn't understand why universities were reaching out to me. I do remember at that time I wanted to become a journalist.

UNLV, I don't remember if they had a program or what it was, but I do remember coming here to UNLV here and there on Saturdays. There was a Latino club, but I just don't remember the name, and I just remember they would talk to us about going to college. That's the first time I heard anyone talk to me about college. I even still have that folder. Ooh, I haven't remembered this—Sorry. Wow. There are some things that you don't remember until you talk about it. I still have that folder because it was the first time anyone talked to me about college. At that time I didn't value that. I kept it for a reason, but I still have it after all these years. It was the very first time anyone even mentioned possibilities for me to go to college, and that's when I understood those letters that I was getting.

I got a letter from University of San Diego and I got a letter from University of Hawaii. University of San Diego offered me half a scholarship. I took the letters to my counselor, and he asked me if I had money to go to college, and I told him no, so he told me not to worry about it.

Now, at that time I was undocumented. I only had a visa. Working a job that just gave me enough to pay my rent and eat, obviously going to college was something that was completely out of the question. My plan was to finish high school and just go back home and finish school there. But I do remember after my counselor told me basically that—he said, “That’s a half a scholarship. Do you have half, the other money, to go to school?” Then he told me that San Diego was really expensive to live on, and so how would I ever survive living in San Diego? I didn’t have a plan for after. My plan was to work and pay for my school.

When everybody was applying for college that was something that I never...even the experience. Even some of my friends that obviously lived with their parents, we talked about this and no one ever talked to us about college. It was almost that you were expected to fail. You were never set up to do anything with your life other than if you’re an immigrant, you’re going to end up being a high school dropout. I remember at that time the *Review-Journal* put out an article saying that Latinas have all these babies, and I can remember because we protested. It was very rare to organize a protest and we did it. It was just a few of us outside the *Review-Journal*. That was the expectation, which it felt—

**You organized a protest because of this article?**

The school. We did it through school SOL, through our Latino club. There were just a few of us that showed up, but it was organized through the club. I felt like that this isn’t any different than if you’re back in Costa Rica that you are expected to finish high school and get married and have kids. They’re expecting me just to get pregnant or to get married and not pursue a higher education, at least it felt that way because there was no one encouraging you or giving you other options other than; if you don’t have money, you can’t afford college.



I graduated in 2003 and I started working full-time. I had friends that were students at UNLV. I would come here sometimes. I have always had this really good memory. I always had this really good memory at UNLV because it was really the only place where someone talked to me about college. Maybe if I would have actually asked for help here, I would had gotten guidance to apply for college. I kind of abandoned that idea. I went to work.

My brother moved back to Las Vegas, and I moved back with him. He had a new wife. I started working where he was working, at his company. I started working there and didn't have a plan until 2014 when I was dating my ex-husband and one of my friends started working at CSN. She told me that there was this program that if I enrolled they would give me a free class. She encouraged me to go talk to a career advisor. Somehow he just made it happen that I got a free class, and it was kind of like a push. Then I paid for other classes, cash. I paid for it out of pocket. I was basically doing one class a semester.

Then I got married and I had different stability in my life and just kind of put school on hold until I got divorced, for many, many years. In 2012, I gave one class a try, but I was a newly divorced person. My daughter was seven at that time, so it was very challenging. I only took one class still up until this day. I am two classes away from graduating.

**Oh, we've got to get you graduated.**

It's been seventeen years since I graduated.

**Who cares how long? You've just got to get that done.**

I know.

**What kind of classes do you take? What's your studies?**

Communication. I do hope to transfer to UNLV next year because I am only ten credits away.

**Oh, please. I want to hear that you graduate.**

Yes, I have to. I owe it to myself and to my daughter. My biggest personal goal has always been to have an education and it feels like it has been the most challenging just for everything. Also, there are people that are able to finish school. I'm documented now; I'm still not a U.S. citizen, but I'm permanent resident, so obviously I have the privilege that I don't have to worry about certain things because I am documented. I guess everyone faces different struggles. Some people just make everything possible and they finish school; I haven't. I actually tried to finish and I joined this new position, this job that I have now, two years ago, and then I completely forgot about finishing school until I said, okay, it's time for me to revisit. But it's definitely been a very long road for me.

**Yes, yes, I hear you. Have you found mentors along the way at all? It sounds like at school you slipped through the cracks.**

I definitely have. When I started working at Mi Familia Vota and you are really invested in the community, you meet other individuals that are invested also in the community, and I came across someone who actually works here, Sylvia Lazos, Professor Lazos. She's a huge advocate for education. She mentors others, not just Latinos, but any students or any younger generations. I wish we had more people like her. I've never seen anyone so invested in really helping others, especially in education. She kind of took me under her wing, and we do a lot of work in education together. Now I have the opportunity to make a lot of changes. I'm proud to have met people along the way that have inspired me to work and build better ELL programs in Nevada.

Last year we passed a bill that Assemblywoman Selena Torres sponsored. I had the opportunity to support the bill, and the bill passed. Basically, in simple words the bill forces the schools to have an ELL plan. That has been a very significant moment in my life and my career working in the community. It's because I am now able to help make changes for others; it allows

other students to maybe not have to go through the same things I went through. I know I'm not the only person that went through that. Again, I have friends that now have their master's degrees, and others have taken so long and said, "If anyone would have had this conversation with us and believe in us when we were in high school..." Different story. But everything happens for a reason. I do believe that everything does happen for a reason in your life. Sometimes we just don't understand things when they happen. Just how I look back on my childhood and I was really privileged, and now I look back and say, all of this has helped me become the person that I am today. It has helped me understand others better and also help others through the platform that I now have.

**You've got a really important job, it seems to me. Talk about your job. Explain what your title is and the organization. Tell me all about that.**

Yes, I am the Nevada state director for Mi Familia Vota. This is an organization that is dedicated to unite Latinos and allies; that's how it is on paper, through promoting civic engagement and voting and citizenship workshops. But through my lens Mi Familia Vota is an organization that really represents the voice of our Latinx community. Whenever a decision, whether it's going to affect for the good or bad in our community, we are there representing the communities and making sure that our voices are represented in different spaces whether it's government, whether it's a decision that is made in the community, but mainly in the government setting.

How I got here...First, in 2016, it was an election that changed a lot of lives.

**You're probably talking about the presidential election.**

Yes. This presidential election changed lives. I was always involved in the community. I volunteer with different groups. I volunteered for this group for a couple of years that promotes higher education for Latinos, and we work with Latinos since they are kindergartners to promote

higher education, to guide them on how to apply for college, and that's how I came across Mi Familia Vota. I wanted to volunteer with an organization that was more involved in politics. Mi Familia Vota felt like an organization that represented me as a person, as a Latina, and I started doing volunteer work with them. It was very natural. I fell in love with the organization, with their mission, what they stand for. I see the impact they have in our communities, holding citizenship workshops, representing our community at the legislature and, also, through election time.

I was a very active volunteer, and they noticed that. They were recruiting. They were looking for someone for their director position. They had someone filling in from another state. I told them no.

Prior to Mi Familia Vota and after I got divorced, I started working in healthcare. I started working for a private company that provided personal care assistance. I started working with them, building relationships in the community. I always, always had this fascination, I guess, to be involved in the community. Even though the work was just to help and serve mostly seniors because they depend on the company to set up their medical equipment, their doctors' appointments, I was kind of like the middle person between them. The company wanted someone that could connect with the Latino clients that they had. I pushed it a little more to, like, let's have helpers for them; let's be resourceful. Some of them would lose their benefits because maybe they needed to process their citizenship, so I would connect them with organizations for citizenship. I just started becoming more resourceful and moved up pretty quickly in the company and I became a marketer. I became a healthcare marketer and then got opportunities from other companies to go work for them. I did that for about six years. That's how I came across Mi Familia Vota, understanding we've got to represent Latinos in healthcare. There isn't

really a lot of representation in healthcare. Setting up these healthcare fairs and resources and having worked in the schools. I was very involved in my church, also. That was a big part of me.

I declined the offer a few times because I was making better money where I was. But it just got to a point where I just wanted to be here. I just wanted to be in Mi Familia Vota. I even took my vacation time just to go volunteer at Mi Familia Vota. They talked to me again and said, “You might as well. You’re already doing the job, so just get paid for it.” I just decided to go for it. It was the feeling like, oh, I don’t want to go to work anymore; I just don’t feel that purpose. To come into this nonprofit work, which you work long hours, barely any time off, but I’ve never been happier. I’ve never been happier being this busy. I really feel that I’m able to really serve my community. Mi Familia Vota is dedicated to really serving Latinos.

**You actually were working there for two years and here we are. Going back to 2016, you mentioned things changed. Can you describe what changed in the Latinx world and with the organization and the goals? Fill the future in on what the past has been like the past four years.**

I remember watching Donald Trump coming down those escalators. We also knew who Donald Trump was. I even met him once in Vegas. I remember being at the Palms when I was younger and my friend was working for one of the casinos, and we just happened to be crossing and I think Donald Trump was going to go into a restaurant. I think it was a security guard, and he was like, “Oh look, it’s Donald Trump. He is one of the richest men in America.” I remember shaking his hand, but this was like 2010, before 2010, around there.

I remember, again, Donald Trump coming down those escalators and his narrative. I knew that if he was attacking—obviously he was attacking the community. But I knew that things would change if that man would become president. I remember watching that and it really

hurt me to hear Donald Trump referring to people as Mexicans, but we know that here there is a stereotype that if you are an immigrant, you're a Mexican, so he was talking about all of us. He wasn't just talking about people from Mexico. He was talking about immigrants and Latinos.

I felt like, what am I going to do? What am I going to do for my community? I tried to volunteer as much as I could to help Hillary Clinton win. That election night was really hard because a lot of people called me crying because they knew what was going to happen.

**I was crying with you, I swear. I've never cried over an election before.**

I never cry. I cried all night because I knocked on doors since seven a.m. the day of the election. I knocked on doors asking people to go vote, talking to the community. A lot of them would come out and say, "I just don't have transportation." And I was so new into politics, too. I remember Chris G [Giunchigliani]? I was volunteering and she was part of that group. I didn't even know what a commissioner did at that time. She told me, "If you have anyone that needs a ride, let me know and I'll pick them up." I was just calling her and texting her, and she was picking up people and taking them to the polls. Even at 6:30 I went to that Target at Charleston and Nellis, and I was asking every single person, "Did you vote? Go get in line before seven. Go get in line." While I was texting people. I really just wanted to do everything that I could to make sure that Donald Trump didn't get elected.

That night was really hard because I had a lot of community members, especially people from our church, text me and call me and say, "What's going to happen? This guy is going to get rid of us." They thought that Donald Trump would immediately send ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] agents in the community to do massive raids, because that was the bad image we had on ICE, and before ICE was INS. It was that bad image. We didn't know what to expect.

I first started getting, okay, you need to know your rights, what's going to happen, and that's how I came to be more involved in Mi Familia Vota. But, yes, I cried all night and then I cried all week. People would ask me, "What's wrong?" And I was like, "What do you mean what's wrong? Donald Trump won. Isn't it obvious? Everything is wrong." It was really, really bad. I cried for a whole week. I listened to Hillary Clinton's speeches. I was completely devastated.

Now, fast forward, it has been very tough for myself, being in a leadership position now in the community for two years, on how do we protect the community? Yesterday was a really hard day for our community. Most of the people in my circle are Latinos. Even my team, we felt defeated yesterday.

**Talk about that. What happened yesterday?**

TPS and the court ruled against TPS [Temporary Protected Status]. Yes, that can be appealed, but we're tired. Our community is so tired. I guess that's why I'm so emotional today because I just feel like we've been fight fights over and over, and it doesn't feel like we're winning anything, with DACA. Even my daughter, it doesn't affect us, but she has learned to love her community and to understand that we are very privileged. We're not directly impacted, but when DACA ended or they announced it, she had a classmate that had DACA. Half of middle school broke down. She was in middle school at that time. I was now in Mi Familia Vota. My daughter is like, "Mom, what can we do to help her?" I'm not trying to be a savior, but I know that at least in November I can look back and say, I did everything I could, I did everything I could, and that's what we're doing now every single day. We're fighting every single day and it's one after another. It's getting to the point where we're very exhausted, like emotionally exhausted from this. We are emotionally exhausted. We are emotionally tired. We've been waiting for the

DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] decision for months, and every Monday and every Thursday it was that anxiety. I had people on my team that are DACA recipients, and we're always preparing, like, what's going to happen? You can't play with people's well-being. Then the news comes out that a guy at the detention center is sterilizing women without them even knowing.

**That's happening now? In the detention centers?**

Yes. And I've been to the detention centers.

**Oh, you have.**

I have here, recently.

**There's one here in Nevada?**

There are three here in Nevada. We have the highest deportation rate in the country, so we are holding the most—the deportation pipeline in Nevada is at a higher rate than anywhere in the country.

I have been to detention centers and knowing that it's an assault on—because I looked at them and that could be me. Now it's Latinas that they're attacking. But understanding how family is so important, I think to anyone, but I'm speaking of my culture how we value our families and as women how we value being mothers. Taking that right away from them, taking it away just because they looked at us as...they don't even look at us as humans. How do you take the right from the woman—this is pro-life people—take the right from the woman to decide whether or not she wants to have more kids or not just because you don't want them having kids on American soil. It's disgusting and I feel ashamed. I love this country and I love my life that I have built here and the people in my community. I think that we deserve better. It doesn't



represent who we are. I know that there are good people and this doesn't represent the vast majority of Americans. I hope people see this and understand that this doesn't represent them.

**A lot of the news recently has been that Latinx, Latino population—I don't know what the number is—that there is a sizeable number supporting Trump despite what you described. How does that happen? How do you explain that to a person like me, a White person? I'll be honest, it's hard for me to understand somebody that's Latino supporting him.**

Yes, it's hard for me to understand, too. I have to understand it because it's part of my job to try to understand them and to try to talk to them. Sometimes I just find myself...I think it's lack of information and it's also—this is from own perspective—maybe they want to fit in and they think that it makes me an American to support the president. I'm trying to understand, too, their own mentality, how I can provide tools to our community to understand they are misguided by what they're watching on Facebook, on TV. If you watch the news in Spanish, they don't provide a lot of information for you to compare the two candidates right now, or say, this person is bad. No Spanish-speaker media really comes forward against Donald Trump, so I think they also play it safe in a way that affects how Latinos view Donald Trump. They say that this is bad, but then Donald Trump is also running ads saying that Biden is a communist—or a socialist.

**A socialist, yes.**

Biden is a socialist, and we're scared of socialists. I was scared of Bernie Sanders. I've never been a fan of Bernie Sanders because I felt like he's way too left. You have to find a balance, and sometimes Donald Trump appeals to a side more in an ad. I'm assuming that they just don't blame him for this, and they blame that it was probably because we had come from such corrupt governments that they just have this natural distrust in government. They think it doesn't matter who it is; government is corrupted, so you have one person.

I feel honestly Obama deported our community. He was not a friend of Latinos. He created this immigration system, and so Donald Trump is just enforcing an immigration system that was created by Obama, and Biden was part of that administration, so a lot of Latinos resemble (sic) anything related to Obama. Yes, they see him as a president that help us get out of a recession and the economy was better under him. He left us with a very healthy economy. But, at the same time, Latinos are racists; they are. We come from communities that are racists. We have a lot of the same issues that this country and then any White person faces as to their races. They think that they should have a president that represents their values, so they view it differently.

I don't want my president to interfere with my religion. I don't care what religion my president practices. I just want him to be a good president. I don't need him to be my preacher. Not everyone views it that way.

I think that a lot of Latinos are scared of losing their American dream. They're scared of losing their American dream, and so they're painting another candidate as a socialist. I think they they're just escape violence, escape, I sacrificed so much to come to this country, and then we're going to end up with a government just like the one we escaped. Unfortunately, they don't research and they don't compare and they don't understand how to fact check. They think that if it is in the internet, it must be true.

**Yes, yes. Very well summarized. What is your daughter doing right now? Let's switch back to home here a little bit. Does she grasp the nature of your work and your passion? At fifteen they can go either way.**

No. She is very determined. It is my daughter, but she's also a Latina and a woman of color, so I feel very proud of her. I have a really good kid. She loves politics. That girl, sometimes I've had

conversations with her and said, “You can’t do this to your friends. You cannot call your friends to talk about who won the primary because they don’t care about municipal elections.” She gets mad at me, like, how do you not know who won the primary election? People don’t know these things, Elisa. They don’t always understand this.

She has been involved with me since she was eleven. She loves everything about my job. The organization is pretty flexible. I bring my daughter with me everywhere, work events. We attended the debate this year. My work, they set up the tickets and they always know that it’s a plus one; I can bring her with me anywhere. That’s the beauty of also being part of this space that it’s very flexible. Understand our community; you have single moms and people that are families, and how much we value our families. My daughter loves it. She loves volunteering, but she likes to do it on her own; she doesn’t want to feel like I’m the one that’s guiding her. Sometimes we bump heads because she wants to do it on her own, or she doesn’t want my opinion, which just makes her a teenager.

She’s very determined to grow up and do something to help her community. She embraces her culture. Her dad was born here. He is from Texas, but family is from Mexico. She is very proud of her Mexican and Costa Rican roots and embraces her culture.

Yes, she loves politics. She has interned for the Nevada Democratic Party. Now she’s interning for someone that is running for district judge. She loves that and enjoys it. Today she was in a public speaking class and she was presenting, and she was presenting something to speak against Donald Trump. I let her have her own opinions, but sometimes I ask her to just be careful; there’s a time and a setting for everything. I have to sit next to her just to make sure that she was not going to receive any negative feedback. Very strong-willed, good kid. She wants to do good.

She wants to study abroad. She loves studying foreign language, so she had made it her mission to learn Japanese and she's doing pretty well, so she wants to study in Japan. She wants to go to NYU. Four years ago for her birthday that's what she wanted as a birthday gift was to go tour NYU, so we went to NYU, very progressive, liberal school. She feels like she knows what she wants.

**That's interesting because one of the words you use a lot is "there wasn't a plan" or "I made a plan," and so she is a girl who is making her plan, and you're showing her the way and giving her the support. That's wonderful.**

Yes, yes, she does, she has all her plans. Sometimes I have to remind her just to be a child and now a teenager, and that it's okay not to have a plan. She's like, "Oh, wow, I don't know if I want to do this now. I think I'm just going to go to school in Japan, and then I'll come back and go to NYU. I don't know. Maybe I'll just become a teacher in Japan and teach English." I was like, "You don't need to...you're fifteen." Well, she was fourteen at the time. I'm like, "You're fourteen. You don't need to have figured out. Why don't you just make a plan, know that you are going to apply and pick three colleges? And you will get into one of them. But you don't need to know exactly what you're going to major on and what job you're getting and the field that you're getting into. You can wait." Sometimes she's a little hard on herself because I think she's just determined to do something.

**She sounds like a cool kid.**

She is a cool kid, very much, but she has grown in that space around more adults than others of her age, so that has helped her grow. But, yes, she is a pretty cool kid.

**That's wonderful.**

Yes. We have a good relationship and we always have a good time together.

**You mentioned to me you were in a book, earlier before we started. Can you tell me a little bit about the book and how you got involved in the content of it?**

Professor Kagan is the director at UNLV immigration.

**That's Michael Kagan?**

Yes, a wonderful person. I've learned about immigration policy through him. He's a professor at nature, so even outside of his classroom he's teaching sometimes. We need to understand the complexity of the policy work on immigration, and so he will hold a workshop for us or mentor us. He was writing a book and he asked me; he wanted to hear my story. Because I'm comfortable with Professor Kagan, I opened up a little bit more to him in the details on how I got here, more in detail some of the rough patches of transitioning and being here in the United States and other stages of my life and, also, what it's like to do the work that I do now. His book is very focused on how the immigration system we have and the policies go against us, against communities that are deemed as criminals when maybe their crime is only the fact that they didn't pay a ticket.

I was part of his book that was last summer. That was also during a very emotional time of being part of Mi Familia Vota because we were helping—and I said we because also we're part of coalitions and other organizations—and we were helping a family who the mom was on her way to pay rent, and she had a deportation order, so she was stopped by an ICE officer and was taken into custody. Her three children were left behind at home and really didn't have any family. Somehow we came across the case. We asked an attorney in the community to help us. She offered to represent her pro bono. They were getting ready to deport her. I think we got the case on Thursday, and they worked on that case over the weekend, day and night, and filed an appeal. She was able to stop the deportation order.

And so it was a very emotional time because it was the first time I was facing the reality of many immigrants. We hear about raids and we hear about people being detained by ICE, but I've never encountered a close experience with anyone that was going through the process. But also the consequences. You talk about a person that was detained by ICE, but she left the family behind, American citizens. If you say that the system is so interested in protecting American citizens. No one went back to check on her children. Rent was due and she didn't make it to pay, so they were served with an eviction order. Three children, one about ten, another one fifteen, and the other twenty, but a full-time student. How do you now on your own for the twenty-year-old say, I have to take care of my siblings?

I got really close to that case because they know me through the work that I do, but as a mother understanding this is horrible. They called me at seven a.m. one day when the police showed up to ask them to leave their home. They were serving them with an eviction order, so the police were there enforcing the eviction order, and they had nowhere to go. They called me at seven a.m. I asked them, "Where are you?" It's like, "I'm outside of your office." It's like, "Okay, I'm on my way." I show up there and they're in their pajamas, on their own. It's heartbreaking. How does a police officer do this and you don't go back and check on this person?

We were doing this case. To shorten the story, Dee was able to appeal the case. We were with them through the whole process. I had to set up a GoFund. I had to go look for an apartment, and I'm grateful that the management at the apartment gave us two weeks' free rent so we can have a place for them to live while we were collecting more money. The mom had a court appearance, an immigration court appearance, and she was granted to be released and just to pay a bill, which an immigration is a portion of what we pay. She was lucky enough that she

was given the minimum, which is five thousand dollars, but it can go up to twenty, twenty-five thousand dollars. Again, GoFund, there was an organization that was able to post bail for her. But being through that process and seeing them...

We were able to retrieve their property. The landlord showed up and I was renting a storage for them because we didn't know where they were going to go live. Finally, I was just like, "I'll just take it to my house until we figure it out." We were getting their stuff out of the house, and he showed up and he became violent. We called the police. I'm thinking, I'll call the police; just leave the house and call the police, and the police will be there shortly. We waited outside of the house for three hours and the police never showed up, very disappointing. We left. When we were on our way, then an officer called me. He's like, "Well, you called." I was like, "Yes, it was almost four hours ago." He's like, "We're really busy." I was like, "Well, you were really busy evicting people when you don't bother to even call a social worker or call someone to check on the people that you're kicking out of their home, especially if they're children." He said, "Well, it wasn't me." I said, "I understand it wasn't you. You're a part of the system." He's like, "Well, there's nothing there I can do." And he hung up on me. Okay.

Then he called me back. Then he thought about it and he called me back in like ten minutes. He's like, "Can I talk to you? Just really sorry. But I was thinking about everything you said and I just feel really bad. Yes, I understand, but we have to perform evictions, but we're not social workers." I was like, "No, you're not social workers, but you're part of this broken system." Just like I do what I do because I feel like I'm going to do something to change this broken system. What is your purpose there? Are you there to enforce evictions, to terrorize communities, to make others just a person of color feel unsafe? What is your purpose of being a police officer? He's like, "I understand what you're saying, but do you want me to go talk to

them?” I have to not only tell them, but anybody, even myself, my daughter, you call the police when you need protection, but you only show up to enforce an eviction. You don’t show up to protect us. So how do you want communities of color to trust the police?

I guess he needed to let things out of his chest, and I did too. That was a very defining moment on this work, too, understanding that there is a lot to do. We have so much work to do, right?

We were able to get the mom; I picked her up from the ICE detention center. Up unto this day they always call me and they’ve kept in touch. They’re always very...we have this connection now.

**They’re still here?**

Yes.

**Is she still under threat of being deported? How does this story end?**

I’m not sure because even though we’re close, it’s a legal case for her.

**I see. So it’s ongoing.**

Probably, but it’s been a year and she’s still here with her children. Sometimes it can take up to five years before they can go back to court, especially now. The immigration courts in Las Vegas are so backed up that it takes years for a person, which means for some of them they have to sit on an ICE detention center before you can see a judge. For some of them that are out, they may—sometimes it’s even a matter of luck because at the time ICE went after her, she was not a person that was a threat to a community, a threat to anybody. The first time that she encountered an interaction with the police was because she had a broken tail light. She was stopped by police, and then she had a suspended driver’s license because she was trying to fix her documents and, as many immigrants, the attorney basically robbed her for the money and didn’t present the



documents on time. Once your paper expires then you can't renew your driver's license, so that was the whole crime that basically put her under the watch of ICE because now your fingerprints are in the system and now they know where you live.

When you get arrested in Las Vegas, one of the questions during booking is whether or not you're a U.S. citizen. A lot of times the question is not whether or not you're a citizen. The question is if you are born outside of the country. They flag it to ICE.

**Just like you would say, "Yes, I was born out of the country," but your documentation, they wouldn't ask about that?**

They don't define whether or not you're documented. ICE has a contract with our police department, and they can freely go inside of the jail because those individuals have been flagged by the police through booking. ICE can interview the person and look further into if the person is documented or not. A lot of times people ask, how can this person that's a U.S. citizen, naturalized citizen, end up—we see that in the news—end up in the ICE detention center? It's because the question during booking is not whether or not you're documented; it's if you were born outside of the U.S., which in Nevada one out of fourteen people are born outside of the U.S. It's part of a broken system. It is part of broken policies that are built to discourage us from being here, built to make it more difficult for people to build their American dream here. This is why when they are in a stage of feeling comfortable and feeling safe, even if that means that if I'm not against the president, not against someone, nothing is going to happen with me. That could also be a reason why sometimes you have Latinos supporting Donald Trump.

**You used a phrase *the American dream*. A hundred years ago, maybe, now—I guess it would be—maybe a hundred years ago my grandfather came to this country for the American dream. He was sixteen. He was poor. Somebody had to go try to make money**

**and he came to the United States. The American dream...I kind of understood what attracted him. What is the American dream now?**

We all have a different perception of what the American dream is. Mine was to achieve higher education. For a lot of Latino men that leave their families behind, it's to provide a future for them even if it's a future away from them. For families that settle here, it's giving their children the opportunity to higher education that we didn't have. I know that is part of mine, too; that I want to see my daughter succeed and graduate from a prestigious university and pursue her dreams of achieving higher education. That is part of our American dream. I think it was unachievable back home. In a way it's ritual here that it can be done in the United States. Times are different now. A lot of people just migrate because they think they're going to become rich. But a lot of people in our country back in the day said they would retire back; they would come and work in the United States for many years and they will retire in their countries. But maybe after twenty years of not seeing their families and children, I guess they felt like, I put them through school, I built them a home, I have some savings and now I can enjoy a life, they live a life here in very poor conditions because they're trying to save every penny either to send it back home or savings for their retirement. They don't take care of themselves here, their health. They have no access to healthcare. What they don't understand is the cost of the sacrifices they make, and sometimes they go back to their countries, but sometimes with the health in very poor conditions, and they don't live a very pleasant life in retirement.

**Tell me about the *Basta* Trump campaign. What's that? *Basta* means enough, right?**

Enough. If you can describe in one word how our community feels about Trump, it's just that we've had enough. Enough is enough. Enough attacks on us. Enough of using us to fire up his base.

We were talking, as Mi Familia Vota, on creating a campaign. We're a nonpartisan organization, never taking a stand against anyone in office. Our focus has always been to educate the community, give them the options—this is where this candidate stands and this is what this other candidate... We know where Trump stands, and Trump is dangerous for our community. He is a threat to our community, his administration and everything that he represents. This *Basta* Trump campaign just resembles how we feel right now with this administration. Enough is enough. We've created this campaign to highlight how he has been attacking, not even for the past four years; he hasn't been president. But since it's here now, it's his candidacy.

**The Biden-Harris platform is that enough to swing some people's vote to the Democrats if they were leaning towards voting for Trump again?**

I think our focus here is more to tell our community, again, how bad Trump is for us. It's also accountability just because we have a campaign that's very specific against Donald Trump—not against Donald Trump. It's very specific to highlight who he is or who he has been for our community, for everything that we represent. He is a danger to our community. But we're also holding anyone accountable.

I was part of a roundtable earlier this year when Biden presented his immigration plan. We just discussed this policy that we have of cooperation between the police and ICE. That needs to stop and that needs to be part of anyone that is running for president because that was unfortunately implemented by Obama. It's understanding the accountability.

Right now Trump is bad for us. Trump cannot continue in office. We cannot have another day like yesterday, and we cannot continue to feel this feeling of... I don't want to say defeat because we're still fighting, but some days are really hard under this administration. Some days

it's really hard to be Latinx under this administration. Looking forward, we cannot continue to have days like this.

**We're also dealing with the pandemic and the disproportionate number of Latinx people that have become sick. Is that part of what your work is, is to inform them about how to take care of themselves during this time physically?**

Yes. I think our community, honestly, understands the severity of this pandemic. He is also a president that downplayed the pandemic. He plays with people's lives and well-beings. You would think that a president would do everything in his power to protect the citizens of this country. Latinos have no access to healthcare. We suffer asthma at a higher rate and percentage than any other groups. I think this pandemic has highlighted what it's like in our everyday lives.

Latinos have no access to healthcare. There's no access to any financial relief at any time.

There's no access to employment if you're undocumented. This twelve-hundred-dollar relief money that came didn't come to our communities. To continue to neglect our communities, the results are you're going to see more numbers of people that are sick because they have to go to work because they are part of the essential workers. A big percentage of them are working in supermarkets. They're healthcare workers, too. It has also affected Latino women the most. We are natural caregivers of our families, and they're facing the decisions whether—I don't think anyone is purposefully going out sick, but if you look at the testing centers up until a couple of weeks ago, the testing centers were open from nine to three. If you have to go to work and you have no sick time and you have no vacation, how do you take a day off to go get tested if you just suspect that you may be sick, or just go to work until you can't really go to work anymore because you are sick? It's highlighting the disparities of our communities, Latinos, but also

communities of color. You can have a testing center here at Thomas and Mack, but most of your hotspots are over there at 89110.

There is a lot of misinformation, too. *Testing centers are asking for Social Security numbers, and that they were advocating to remove those questions.* If they don't have a Social, it's fine; they can just put zero. They don't understand we're not comfortable lying to the government, so you can't tell someone, "Just put a zero; it's going to be fine." No, it's not going to be fine because they have been told in the past, and maybe listening to the wrong advice, led them to jeopardize their immigration status. They don't understand how delicate it is. To tell a person just to put zeroes for their Social Security on a county hospital that is linked to government? That's not going to happen.

To have a testing center that is open during hours where most of our community is already at work, how do you ask a construction worker to go get tested at nine a.m.? They have already been at work for three hours.

It's just the disparities not only in the lack of information, but how many times, when you started hearing about this pandemic, you heard information in Spanish coming out of any government entity? Press releases are held in English. A lot of times I feel like they're expecting us, organizations that work with communities of color, to be the messengers without the resources and without the tools for us to inform our communities. Yes, I think this virus has just highlighted the disparities that we live, not just through this pandemic, but it's every single day in the life of many undocumented communities.

**What do you hear from your family in Costa Rica about this same era with the COVID-19?**

They think that we don't—well, at first it's Donald Trump; that we have a government that doesn't care for its citizens.

**Does he care if we die?**

No, he doesn't. We already know that. You and I know that. But this is coming from outsiders that say, how the president has downplayed, has spread misinformation from this virus when most presidents are every day on TV asking their citizens to wear a mask, to comply with protocols, with direct orders. Then you have a president that just doesn't care. On top of that he's holding rallies. The division that we are living, it's reflected; other countries are seeing that we are completely divided and disconnected. He is just the president of his base. He is not the president of the United States.

**That's well put. That's really good. I like that line. I could keep talking to you all night.**

This is fun, especially because I also—I do have a lot of conversations about work, but I've also been quarantined here for six months.

**To get out, it feels good.**

Yes, to interact with adults, and I got to get out of my house. I've been out because we're running programs, helping people. We have to fill in the gaps for government. We have a program right now that provides groceries that people that are COVID positive. Actually, in partnership with the School of Medicine, they're doing wellness calls, calling the patients that we have in our program. If they need over-the-counter medication, then we're trying to get it to them so they're not leaving their homes. And they're trying to also set them up with Social Services.

**Excellent. That's good stuff. That's really good stuff. Any other stories that you'd like to share with me? Any other topics that we haven't covered that we should at least get something in here about?**

No. I thank you. I think this has been really focused on now. We revisited my childhood, some memories that sometimes you just put in the back of your head and you move on.

**When you say the childhood, one of the things that Nathalie always talked about with her time in Costa Rica was the food. I would be remiss if I didn't bring up the food. What are the typical Costa Rican dishes, and do you prepare these for your daughter?**

We eat a lot of white rice, almost three times a day, the three meals. Typical breakfast is the rice and beans mixed; it's called *gallo pinto*, which doesn't really make sense, the name, but I don't know. *Gallo* is rooster and then *pinto* can be the mix, so maybe because it's breakfast. I don't know. I never looked into the name. I kind of have accepted it now. With a lot of plantains.

Typical in Mexico, we eat tortillas and we eat a lot of plantains, fried, sweet plantains. Coffee. Coffee is made in Costa Rica. Not only do we produce it, my grandma drinks coffee all day, but she also grows her own coffee.

**Oh, does she really?**

Yes, beautiful. You have to go to Costa Rica one day.

**I have to—when we're free travel about.**

Yes. Yes, you have to go.

...You don't mix the rice and beans anymore. Just a lot of white rice, beans, vegetables and then a meat, and it's called *casado*, which is like marriage; that's the signature dish.

Everything that includes rice. I do make some, but I feel that even though it's good, but it's not the most, I would say, like Mexican culture and the food is so rich. The Mexican food is so delicious and high cuisine. We don't really have that in Costa Rica. Or if you go to El Salvador, they have their *pupusas*. Most of our dishes are rice and beans with something.

I do make it and my daughter likes my sister's rice better. It's just okay. Especially during quarantine, I never really before had a lot of time to slow down and cook, and I've been trying to make some of those Costa Rican dishes, and not bad. There is this one in particular that

my daughter really likes and it's a lot of work, but it's good. The corn, I scrape the corn out of the cob and then I blend it, and then I make what looks like a pancake mixture. I put just a little bit of flour just to give it some texture and so it holds, and then I make a pancake out of that. It's really, really good, but it's a lot of work because I have to scrape the corn with a knife. Then you probably need three corns to make one because it looks like a pancake. But she loves that. Then she eats like five, and then I need like twenty corns to make her five pancakes of that. That's her favorite Costa Rican dish, and so I'm proud that I can make it. It doesn't come out very uniform, but it's the taste that counts and it tastes really good. I think that's my most Costa Rican dish. Other than that I don't do a lot of Costa Rican cooking, just because we eat rice one, two days and then we get tired.

...Moms always carry on the culture and it's usually because my brothers take whichever culture their wives are more inclined to; that's how their kids are raised. With me and my sister, our kids are very similar; they're being raised very similar, so we eat a lot of meats. Yes, you have to go to Costa Rica. Too bad you didn't get to.

**What kind of music? You've been here twenty years. Has your music taste changed since you were sixteen?**

Yes. I don't have that Latino rhythm that most Costa Ricans have. I definitely don't. A lot of tropical music influence, a lot of Caribbean music influence in Costa Rican music. They have this—which I never heard anywhere else—called swing, which is like a very fast Merengue/Salsa mix, but it's very fast.

G, swing. I never heard it anywhere else, but I think it's very typical in Costa Rica, not so much anymore. But the music, yes. Now we have a lot of Americans that retire in Costa Rica, so



English is the second language, so a lot of American influence in Costa Rica, too, so it's very common.

**It sounds very attractive.**

It is, yes. Especially during these times, I want to quarantine there. Actually, Nevada is on the red list; we're not allowed in the country.

**I'm not allowed to go to Boston without a lot of testing and quarantining. I don't have that time to do that.**

Yes. When you get there you have to quarantine and they do check on you, especially if you come from Nevada, they would check on you and make sure that you...I have a friend that went to the East Coast, and she says she got a call in an hour to check on her. Yes, we're not allowed. After the election I'm going to try and see if I can go back to Costa Rica for the rest of the year, so hopefully. Well, I can because I'm a national, so they can't deny me entry. My passport just expired and the only way to renew it is really just to go to Costa Rica. I have not many choices but to go back, which I'm okay with that.

**Thank you so, so much, Cecia. Does your name have a meaning?**

It's from the Bible.

**I've never met anybody named Cecia.**

It's from the Bible. If you heard the story of Job in Bible? His fate was tested and he lost his fortune and his wife and daughters, and then God blessed him again with a new family, and one of the daughter's names was Cecia.

**Okay, there you go. I'm blessed to have met you.**

Thank you.

**This has been wonderful. Thank you so much.**

I've enjoyed it. Thank you for listening.

**[End of recorded interview]**